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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT CONFIRMS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION MEMBERS

¶1. On October 3, Parliament confirmed five representatives for the newly-established Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone.

¶2. The new representatives are:

Jamesfina King: Has a Master's Degree in International Legal Studies with a focus on Human Rights. She has been in private practice for the past 12 years and is currently the head of a female lawyers' organization, "Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equality Rights and Social Justice" (LAWYER) that is working on a female prisoner project. She is an ethnic Krio from Freetown.

Yasmin Baindu Sandor Jusu-Sheriff: Has an LLM (with merit) in Human Rights Law and is a well-known human rights advocate and civil society activist interested in the rights of women and children. She is married to Dr. Alusine Fofana, Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee. She is an ethnic Mende from southern Sierra Leone.

Edward Sam: A professional adult educator and an active human rights activist with years of experience working with the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights (NCDHR). He is an ethnic Mende from southern Sierra Leone.

Joseph Stanley: An attorney and ex-police officer, Stanley joined the police in 1957, and rose through the ranks to the position of Inspector General before retirement in 1993. He is an ethnic Krio from Freetown.

Rev. Moses Khanu: Khanu has served as head of the Baptist Church and also president of the Inter Religious Council. He is an ethnic Limba from northern Sierra Leone.

¶3. The idea of a human rights commission is not new. When President Kabbah's democratically elected government took over from the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) junta in 1996, he added a human rights mandate to the National Commission for Democracy, which the NPRC had formed in 1994. The new National Commission on Democracy and Human Rights (NCDHR) was weak, however, and the 1999 Lome Peace Accord called for the formation of an "autonomous, quasi-judicial" national Human Rights Commission within 90 days after the signing of the accord to address people's grievances regarding alleged human rights violations. No such commission ever formed and the NCDHR's mandate was never strengthened. In 2004, Parliament passed legislation mandating a stand-alone Human Rights Commission and gave it High Court-like powers to call witnesses and request documents, as well as granting it full access to government offices and facilities to investigate claims of human rights abuses.

¶4. Parliament's confirmation of the new commissioners was the culmination of a year-long process of calls for applications,

interviews, nominations and selections. At the end of 2005, the civil society panel rejected the first round of nominees as insufficiently qualified.

15. COMMENT: The new commissioners represent a good regional and gender balance, although none are Muslim. In a country where 60 percent of their fellow Sierra Leoneans are Muslim this could be a problem, but Sierra Leone is justifiably proud of its religious tolerance and it is unlikely that the commission will be faced with complaints about violations of religious rights. Complaints of violations against women are much more likely. King and Jusu-Sheriff have excellent reputations in that regard and could help the commission do great things under UNIOSIL's watchful eye (helping the commission is part of UNIOSIL's mandate). Because the commission's salaries will be paid by the government, however, the Human Rights Commission will face the same political pressures as other commissions (e.g., the Anti-Corruption Commission, National Electoral Commission, and Political Parties Registration Commission). This will make it difficult for the Commission to effectively investigate violations of political rights, a valid concern in light of the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for July 2007. END COMMENT.

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